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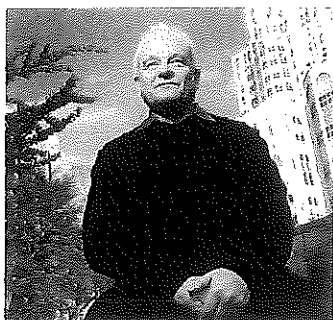
Nurse report backs councils shake-up

Royal Society head proposes overarching UK funding body

Royal Society president Paul Nurse has released his long awaited review of the UK research councils that are responsible for allocating around £3 billion of arts and science funding every year. While the report does not go as far as recommending a merger between the councils – as some had feared – it does suggest changes to the way they are managed, including the creation of a new umbrella body to oversee all seven councils' activities.

In his review, Nurse says funding bodies need better links with government and leaders in industry. To achieve this, he said a new body, Research UK (RUK), should be created to replace the current Research Councils UK partnership. RUK would have greater powers than its predecessor, as well as much closer links to government, potentially through a new ministerial committee chaired by a senior member of the cabinet.

The seven research councils themselves would remain



Royal Society president Paul Nurse didn't recommend major reforms

distinct, overseeing the allocation of research money in their respective disciplines. But the review said a better system for funding inter-disciplinary research was needed, and suggested that a separate pot of money for such projects should be set up and managed by RUK, although it is unclear whether this would be expected to come out of the research councils' existing budgets.

The dual funding system, where institutions receive direct funding and research councils provide the cash for projects, was also up for review. Nurse concluded this system should

be kept, but responsibility for funds currently administered by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce) should move to RUK. This appears to chime with the government's proposal to scrap Hefce put forward in its higher education green paper earlier this month. The review stressed the need for closer collaboration between research councils and industry leaders, but said the industry funder Innovate UK should remain separate from RUK.

The Nurse review says the changes it suggests are 'not complex and could be easily adopted without disrupting on-going research activities'. 'These new structures will improve decision-making about research, which requires high quality strategic thinking in the research community combined with in-depth knowledge and understanding of the research landscape in government,' it says.

Naomi Weir, acting director of the Campaign for Science and Engineering advocacy group, welcomed the review. 'It is great to see ... recommendations

on strengthening strategic join-up across disciplines and government departments, rather than wasting precious resources rearranging the furniture,' she said in a statement. She added that it was too early to tell whether closer links with government would lead to better collaboration or allocation of science funding or risk 'ministerial micro-management'.

'What is abundantly clear ... is that benefits from enacting the recommendations made today will be stymied without adequate funding,' she added.

Responding to the Nurse review, universities and science minister Jo Johnson said the government was committed to ensuring the continued success of the UK's 'world class' research base. 'Sir Paul's recommendations reinforce the important steps the research councils are taking to work together in a more strategic and efficient way,' he said. 'The government will carefully consider the proposal to establish Research UK and we will respond in detail to the report in due course.'

Emma Stoye

Poor management of antibiotics squandering life-saving drugs

Unregulated sales driving global resistance problem

A thriving unregulated online market for antibiotics and poor quality products are two problems that are driving antimicrobial resistance worldwide, according to the latest report from the Review on Antimicrobial Resistance.

Sales of antibiotics without a prescription are relatively common in southern and eastern Europe – representing between 20% and 30% of the total market – as well as in many low and middle-income countries. Online pharmacies, though, represent a new challenge for regulators, the report notes.

Some vendors, based in

countries where regulation is lax, will ship antibiotics, including drugs of last resort such as colistin, to Europe without a doctor's prescription. Colistin made the news recently after resistance in *Escherichia coli* was reported in animals and humans by scientists in China.

'Websites can take advantage of lax regulatory regimes in their home countries and gaps in customs checks in the countries to which they ship,' the report notes. 'Many such online vendors will sell quantities that exceed single courses.' This makes their services suited to irresponsible self-medication and stockpiling. The report argues that this is an international problem, requiring global fixes from regulators,

customs and internet companies.

The second problem spotlighted is that of counterfeit and substandard antimicrobial drugs entering the global supply chain. Poor quality medicines can exacerbate the spread of drug resistance. Most dangerous are products with enough active pharmaceutical ingredient to kill susceptible microbes, but to also bestow a selective advantage to resistant microbes. This can happen if a medicine is degraded by improper storage, an accidental production error or manufacturing negligence. Intentionally substandard manufacturing is also a problem.

There is 'considerable uncertainty' over the scale of the problem of poor quality

antibiotics, as monitoring is extremely patchy. 'Where studies have looked for evidence of the problem though, they have often found it,' the report notes.

Rising antibiotic resistance has been invisible in many countries, but it is at last being recognised, says Otto Cars, infectious disease scientist at Uppsala University in Sweden. 'Even in the EU, which is well regulated, there are countries that are allowing over-the-counter sales without prescription, so there needs to be a global mechanism,' he adds. 'And for countries with weak economies and weak healthcare systems you cannot take away over-the-counter sales, because then there will be a problem with access to medications.' Anthony King

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